DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 589 EA 030 962

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TITLE Three Years of Graduation 2010: Evolution of an Evaluation Plan.
PUB DATE 2000-11-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (29th, Bowling Green, KY, November 15-17, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Curriculum Development; Educational Innovation; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Methods; *Evaluation Problems; Outcomes of Education; Program Evaluation; *Program Implementation
IDENTIFIERS Daviess County School System KY; Kentucky

ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent research in brain development, the public schools district in Daviess County, Kentucky, has developed a comprehensive program with the purpose of increasing students' capacity for learning and achievement. The program called Graduation 2010 was conceived by educators and members of the community during 1997. The eight components, or "strands," of the program are now separated into three categories. The category referred to as Enhancers includes four "strands" intended to enhance learning (music, the arts, foreign language, and thinking skills). Another category is called Support and includes two "strands" designed to increase support for schools' efforts to increase student learning (family involvement and community involvement). This paper briefly describes the background and components of Graduation 2010, and the original evaluation plan as formulated by the research team together with the project steering committee. Also discussed are some of the challenges and problems encountered with developing and conducting the evaluation plan adopted for future evaluation. Abbreviated results of evaluation efforts during the first 3 years are given, including the results of surveys to measure the degree of implementation of the program and the results of interviews conducted with teachers about the program. (TEJ)

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Three Years of Graduation 2010: Evolution of an Evaluation Plan*

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Abstract

Drawing on recent research in brain development, the public school district in Daviess County, Kentucky has developed a comprehensive program with the purpose of increasing students' capacity for learning and achievement. The program called Graduation 2010 was conceived by educators and members of the community during 1997. The eight components or 'strands' of the program are now separated into three categories. The category referred to as Enhancers includes four 'strands' intended to enhance learning (music, the arts, foreign language, and thinking skills). Another category identified as Remove Barriers includes two 'strands' intended to reduce barriers to student learning (reading/language development and health/emotional health). The final category is called Support and includes two 'strands' designed to increase support for schools' efforts to increase student learning (family involvement and community involvement). This paper briefly describes the background and components of Graduation 2010, and the original evaluation plan as formulated by the research team together with the project steering committee. Also discussed are some of the challenges and problems encountered with developing and conducting the evaluation plan during the first three years of the project, and the resulting modified evaluation plan adopted for future evaluation. Abbreviated results of evaluation efforts during the first three years are given, including the results of surveys to measure the degree of implementation of the program and the results of interviews conducted with teachers about the program.

Evaluation of Graduation 2010

In this paper, we will present the background and description of the major components of Graduation 2010, the research plan as it was initially conceived and how it has evolved, and some of the key findings from evaluation of the first three years of the project. We will also discuss some of the issues inherent in attempting to reach conclusions about a program that is continuously transforming and how that has impacted the research plan design.

Background and Essential Components

The Graduation 2010 program is a curricular program developed by the Daviess County Public School system located in Daviess County, Kentucky. In 1997, a steering committee of educators, parents, and community members researched relevant information on brain development to determine what curricular changes could be made that would enhance intellectual capacity and remove barriers to learning of children in the school system. Naming its effort Graduation 2010 for the graduation year of the children who would enter kindergarten in the fall of 1997, the committee identified eight areas where educational changes might prove beneficial. These eight areas are also referred to as strands. In the past year, the school district has twice changed the categorization of these strands. There are now three categories: 'Enhancers', 'Remove Barriers', and 'Support'. The 'enhancers', which provide enhancements to the curriculum to increase the learning capacity of students include music, the arts, foreign language (now referred to as 'second language'), and thinking skills. The strands identified as 'remove barriers' seek to remove the barriers to student learning and include reading and health/emotional health. The third category referred to as 'support' is designed to increase support for schools' efforts to increase student learning and includes the strands of family involvement and community involvement.

Eight committees were formed to further study each of the eight areas and to develop implementation goals and guidelines. A review of the empirical evidence used by each committee is presented in the first year implementation report (Norman, O'Phelan, & Ecton, 1998).

The eight committees submitted short-range and long-range goals for Graduation 2010. What follows is an identification of the short-range goals. For Music, goals included allocating space, training teachers, and establishing keyboard labs in each school. For the Arts, goals included identifying an arts facilitator for each school and coordinating at least nine arts experiences for kindergarten. For Foreign Language (Spanish), goals included training teachers in Spanish, developing instructional videotapes, and beginning instruction in basic Spanish vocabulary. For Thinking Skills, teachers were trained in Talents Unlimited (Chissom & McLean, 1993) and were to begin implementing strategic games such as chess, into the curriculum. For Family Involvement (Parental Involvement), several strategies were recommended including new student orientations and homework committees composed of teachers and parents. For Health/Emotional Health, goals included providing each school a nurse one day a week and developing fitness programs at each school. For Reading/Language Development (Reading), the goal was to implement the Kentucky Reads program which targets primary children who are at least one grade level behind in reading. For Community Involvement, the goal was to secure a corporate sponsor from the community for the 2010 kindergarten class.

A final goal of the steering committee was to obtain a research team that would study both the level of implementation of the goals at each school and the overall effect of this program on student intellectual development and achievement. The committee contacted the Dean of Western Kentucky University's (WKU) College of Education and Behavioral Sciences and requested assistance. The research team was created when the Dean asked us to consider working with the school district's steering committee, superintendent, and administrators to develop a research evaluation plan. As a signal of its commitment to the evaluation process, the Daviess County Public Schools hired a research and assessment coordinator for the school district who would also serve as a liaison between the WKU research team and the school district.

Developing a Research Plan

During the first year of Graduation 2010, the research team met several times with administrators and steering committee members in Daviess County to plan an evaluation strategy that would be responsive to the needs of the program. Most of these meetings were dedicated to clarifying the goals and procedures associated with the project. We faced some early difficulties because we were not involved in the initial planning of the program and entered the process after implementation had already begun. As a result, it took nearly a full year of communication before we could come to agreement about what we would be looking for, what information we would need to gather, and how to go about gathering it. (The late start during the first year of implementation limited the initial evaluation effort to a survey to gauge the extent to which the intended steps of the program had been implemented.)

The complexity of evaluating this project quickly became apparent. Each strand of Graduation 2010 had at least one recommendation and each recommendation had a list of implementation steps. The list of implementation steps ranged in number from a minimum of 3 in the Arts strand to a maximum of 29 in the Family Involvement strand, and in some cases, implementation steps were written such that they included various parts. The total implementation steps was 107. To further complicate the issue, implementation steps were not necessarily equal in weight, such that the implementation of only one step might be more significant than implementation of several steps. Furthermore, the scope of the program requires much cooperation and planning, and it was never intended to be implemented all at once. Also, implementation was not required of any school, and decisions about what and when to implement were left up to the individual school.

During the first year and continuing into the second year, there was much discussion about what the elements of the project included, what they were trying to accomplish, and what indicators of success could be used to evaluate the project. Originally, committee members wanted student scores as the bottom line, but gradually, we started hearing 'capacity to learn,' which we interpreted to mean aptitude, as well as achievement. We started with the following indicators for achievement: Woodcock-Johnson, Talents Unlimited tests, SAT scores, Kentucky's state assessment scores, CTBS/5(TerraNova), ACT scores, Advanced Placement tests, and scores on the Primary Test of Cognitive Skills (P/TCS). The school district already uses most of these tests, and they agreed to provide the scores to us as they became available.

These discussions resulted in 10 research questions, each of which had several different indicators. A list of indicators by research question is presented in Table 1. We decided on a variety of information to help us assess the overall impact of the program. We wanted to do more than count the things that are easily counted (e.g., how many minutes per week of music instruction). We recognized that many other things could impact the degree and quality of

Table 1. Research Plan for Graduation 2010

Research Question	Instrumentation	Time Frame
1. To what degree has each strand of the program be implemented?	Survey of principals School visitations # of teachers trained in Talents Unlimited School data sheets	Yearly
2. To what degree has the learning of children been increased?	P/T.S. Woodcock Johnson (individuals) Talents Unlimited Tests	Yearly
3. Has the program increased achievement?	KIRIS (CATS) CABS/5 (TerraNova) # of students in upper level courses Advanced Placement tests # of students taking SAT/ACT/SAGE SAT/ACT/SAGE tests Kentucky Reads results % of students reading at or above grade level School data sheets	Yearly
4. Has the school learning environment improved?	School culture audits Student/teacher/parent interviews/surveys Attitude surveys of music, arts, foreign language	Yearly
5. Has family involvement increased?	Parent/student/teacher surveys School data sheets # of PTO members # attending school meetings # of parent volunteers	Yearly
6. Has the health of students improved?	# of absences Demographics (pregnancies, etc.) Parent/teacher/student surveys	Yearly
7. To what extent are students well educated?	School data sheets # taking foreign language, AP classes, art, music, upper level courses # and % taking ACT/SAT ACT/SAT scores # and % of dropouts # and % in college prep track # and % going to college # receiving scholarships	Yearly
8. Are students benefitting from the arts?	CATS performance assessment School data sheets # taking private music lessons # enrolled in fine arts and music class # in arts clubs and activities	Yearly
9. Are students benefitting from foreign language?	School data sheets # enrolled in foreign language classes # participating in foreign language clubs and activities	Yearly
10. Has community involvement increased?	Teacher/student/administrator surveys Letters from sponsors Documentation of sponsor participation	Yearly

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implementation of the program. We knew we needed some qualitative evaluation to find out how different stakeholders feel about the project, whether or not teachers, students, and parents are buying into it, and even general atmosphere and level of cooperation and collegiality at individual schools. We agreed that data analyses would have to include qualitative descriptions of survey and interview responses, quantitative comparisons of test scores and frequency variables, and trend analyses for tested groups and individuals. Results would be reported at yearly intervals for the program as a whole, by school, and by program strand.

We asked for information such as number of students taking the SAT, enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and taking AP tests, or enrolled in higher level courses. We asked for the number of students going to college or getting scholarships, dropping out of school, the number of pregnancies during high school, the number of students taking music lessons outside of school, choosing to study abroad, or getting involved in foreign language, art, or music clubs. We included surveys and interviews, as well as data sheets (containing some of the information listed above) to be completed by the schools, school culture audits, and individual testing for a sample of students.

There were some limitations on the research design as well as the data gathering procedures worth noting. First, the absence of any allocation of funds for the evaluation of the program affected decisions about data gathering and time for the research team. Second, the district administrators did not want to overburden faculty and staff with data collection procedures by asking them to do more paperwork than they already have to do. Third, administrators felt it would be inappropriate for the research design to include a control group, either from within the school system or from a comparable district elsewhere. Finally, they did not want surveys to go out to community at large but only to staff and students of the county public school system since a large independent school system operates within the same county, contributing to a politically sensitive environment.

Evaluation Begins

As previously mentioned, during the first year the evaluation focus was on implementation (see Norman, O'Phelan, & Ecton, 1998). Principals were given an open-ended survey halfway through the first year on which they were asked to report progress in each of the eight strands of the program. At the end of the first year, principals were asked to rate to what extent each of the goals for that year had been accomplished in their schools. A similar survey was given at the end of year two with modifications made to accommodate the dynamic aspect of the program (see O'Phelan, Norman, & Ecton, 1999). Likewise, the survey used in the third year underwent some modifications to better reflect the changes which continued to be made to the program (see O'Phelan, Norman, & Ecton, 2000). The superintendent was also given a survey each year to rate overall implementation progress in each of the eight strands.

During year two, we began collecting baseline data to measure student intellectual change as the program progresses. We individually tested those students who were part of a sample of 150 kindergarten students for whom the schools had received parental permission. We were able to test 115 out of the original 150 students in the sample. An additional sample of kindergarten students were tested during year three.

Also, during the latter part of year two, we conducted school culture audits for all 12 elementary schools. When the results of the culture audits were presented to each school's faculty, researchers interviewed the teachers about positive and negative changes occurring in the school, problems with teaching and learning, suggestions for improvement, and finally, their opinions about Graduation 2010.

To gather data required from individual schools, we devised a data sheet to be completed by the schools during the school year. So as not to overburden school personnel, the district administration requested that we consolidate this data form to include all of the information we could not otherwise obtain. Schools were to progressively complete the form during the year as data became available and return the completed form to us at the end of the year.

First Year Implementation

Mid-year and at the end of the first year, principals reported their progress toward 1997-98 goals by rating each goal as not implemented at all, partially implemented, or fully implemented. Not surprising, considering the voluntary nature of the program, progress of schools in implementing the 1997-98 goals at mid-year reflected an uneven pattern. Two strands (Music and Health/Emotional Health) were reported to be fully implemented, although information about Health/Emotional Health was missing from one school. Seven schools reported full implementation of the Kentucky Reads program. Some progress was reported on the remaining strands, with between four and ten schools reporting some level of activity. Eight of the 12 schools reported some progress toward the Arts goals, one reported full implementation and three reported no implementation. There was a similar response on the Thinking Skills component. Nine schools reported some level of progress on the goals for Foreign Language and three reported none. For Family Involvement, 10 schools reported some implementation and two reported no progress toward the goals. Although there was no specific school level goal for Community Involvement since the general goal was to obtain corporate sponsorship for each class at the district level, in response to a question about Community Involvement, 10 schools reported some activity, one reported none, and information from one school was missing.

At the end of the year, 11 of the 12 schools reported using the same survey format. Ten of the 11 schools reported full implementation of the three goals for the Arts strand (identify an arts facilitator, provide nine arts experiences, and provide a Riverpark experience). All 11 schools reported full implementation of the Music goal (install keyboard labs in the school), and 10 reported having a school nurse at least once a week, a goal of the Health/Emotional Health strand. Between the midyear and end of the year reporting, there was a shift in the number of schools reporting full implementation rather than partial implementation on goals associated with Family Involvement, Foreign Language, Reading/Language Development, and Thinking Skills.

When overall ratings were limited to the list of 1997-98 goals, Music, Arts, and Reading/Language Development merited high implementation ratings, and Health/Emotional Health, Family Involvement, and Thinking Skills had medium ratings. Progress toward implementation was further evidenced by the shifts from low and medium categories at mid-year to medium and high categories at the end of the year. The complete results of first year implementation may be found in the report on Graduation 2010 (Norman, O'Phelan, & Ecton, 1998).

Second Year Implementation

Principal surveys were also used to measure implementation in the schools by the end of the second year. The dynamic aspect of the project made it impossible to use the same survey items for year two as were used for the first year. Some of the steps required one time only activities (e.g., establish guidelines, hire personnel, allocate space, buy keyboards for music), and once completed, those items were no longer applicable. Some steps not yet introduced during the first year had to be added to the second year survey because at least some schools were

beginning to implement them. At the same time, some of the implementation steps on the original list had been eliminated as not feasible or desirable. Finally, some altogether new ones were added during the second year.

Using the 1997-98 goals as a standard, two strands could be considered fully implemented. All 12 schools reported full implementation of the original goals for Foreign Language and Music strands by the end of the second year. As many as 10 or 11 schools reported full implementation of some of the goals in the Arts, Family Involvement, Reading/Language Development, and Thinking Skills. All schools reported at least medium levels of implementation with respect to the 1997-98 goals.

However, when considering all items on the 1999 survey and looking at the overall self report data for the 12 schools reporting, two strands (Thinking Skills and Health/Emotional Health) appear to have been relatively low in implementation. For these two strands, there were no items for which at least 11 of the 12 schools reported full implementation and most items had less than half the schools reporting full implementation. Using a similar standard, Music would be considered moderate in implementation since only two of the 21 items had 11 or 12 schools reporting full implementation but 10 items had at least half of the schools in full implementation. Family Involvement could be said to have moderate implementation overall since three of the 22 items were reported to be fully implemented by at least 11 schools, and very few items were rated at the lower end of the rating scale. The Foreign Language strand was reported as moderately high in implementation. At least 11 principals reported full implementation for two of the three Foreign Language goals. Finally, the strands for the Arts and Reading/Language Development were reported as high in implementation. Between nine and 11 schools reported full implementation on five of the six goals for the Arts, with very few ratings at the lower end of the scale.

Analyses of these data were complicated by a number of factors. Since the strands had unequal number of steps (and survey items), it was somewhat arbitrary to classify each strand as low, moderate or high in implementation. The complexity of the program made it difficult to evaluate the implementation of individual strands. The program has been dynamic in nature and was intended to be implemented gradually. Implementation by each school has been voluntary and decisions about what and when to implement were left up to the individual school. Likewise, principals were not given definitions of different levels of implementation so what one principal considered 'full implementation' might have been considered only partial implementation by another principal. The complete results of second year implementation can be found in O'Phelan, Norman, & Ecton (1999).

A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' Reactions

A concern regarding the implementation of this program was that the overall school climate might influence its effectiveness at each school. In the Spring of 1999, we conducted school culture audits for all 12 elementary schools. The audit results revealed that all schools were found to be healthy with very few discrepancies between the importance and presence of key elements of a healthy school climate. While meeting with each school to present the results of the culture audit, the research team led the school faculty through a discussion of nine open-ended questions and one rating question related to Graduation 2010. The questions generally dealt with what changes and problems teachers saw in their school as well as their opinions about Graduation 2010.

Teachers cited a variety of problems and mentioned both positive and negative changes. Most of these had to do with (what was then referred to as) barriers to learning such as parenting,

health/emotional health, and student behavior problems. Teaching problems cited were more related to time constraints and instructional issues. On the other hand, discussion of changes in the schools and the most important aspects of services for students were generally positive and all enhancer strands of Graduation 2010 were mentioned. Three of the four enhancer strands (Arts, Spanish, and Thinking Skills) were mentioned as the best thing the school does.

Finally, teachers were asked to rate on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 not important at all, 10 very important), the importance of Graduation 2010 to their school. Eight schools rated Graduation 2010 as 8 or higher in importance. One school rated the program as 7 if Spanish and chess were included and 5 if they were not. One school rated Graduation 2010 between 2 and 5 in importance.

Specific problems identified with Graduation 2010 were about time constraints, teacher training, and three of the four enhancer strands, especially Spanish. Music was not mentioned as a problem. A more detailed discussion of the results of this qualitative analysis is contained in the report by Norman, O'Phelan, & Ecton (1999).

Third Year Implementation

Surveys, similar to those used in the second year but again modified to accommodate changes in the program, were distributed to the principals in the 12 elementary schools and the superintendent. These administrators were asked to rate the implementation of the original goals of the project from no implementation to full implementation. The survey also asked for ratings on implementation steps that were added to the survey as a result of the program changes in 1999 and 2000. Based on survey results, implementation was classified as low, moderate, or high for each strand.

When all survey items are included, two strands, Health/Emotional Health and Thinking Skills, were classified as low in implementation as rated by principals. Also, based on ratings of principals, Music, Reading/Language Development, Foreign Language, and Family Involvement were classified as moderate, and the Arts strand was classified as high in implementation. (The strand of Community Involvement was not included in the survey since the only goal was essentially to obtain sponsors for each succeeding Kindergarten class and this was a responsibility of the district.) The superintendent's rating for overall implementation disagreed with the principals' ratings in six of the seven strands rated, although the difference was considerable in only two instances. The superintendent's rating was slightly higher for implementation in Family Involvement, Thinking Skills, and Reading/Language Development. His rating was slightly lower in the Arts. His rating was considerably higher in Music and Health/Emotional Health. The superintendent's rating agreed with the principals' rating in Foreign Language. Subjective interpretation of goal statements or survey items might also explain the fact that the superintendent's general rating of implementation for each strand did not exactly agree with the classification of ratings derived from the survey of principals.

However, if the measurement of implementation is limited to the original 1997-98 goals, strands high in implementation would be the Arts, Music, and Foreign Language. Family Involvement, Health/Emotional Health, and Thinking Skills would be considered moderate, and implementation in Reading/Language Development would be considered low.

When Year Three implementation is compared with the original goals, the number of schools at each successive stage of implementation has increased. With the exception of Family Involvement goals, there were no schools reporting 'no implementation' at the end of the third year for any goal. On the other end of the implementation spectrum, however, even at the

end of the third year, most of the strands were not yet fully implemented in terms of the 1997-98 goals for implementation.

Analysis of these data continue to be complicated by the same factors which were discussed in the section above concerning Year Two Implementation except the problems become compounded with each succeeding year due to continuing changes in the program. Again, some items on the previous survey have been eliminated and new items added. Also, the goals for the project have not been revised since 1997-98. This has caused imperfect alignment between the survey questions and the list of goals to be evaluated. As a result, two different standards of comparison were used in the third year implementation report, the original 1997-98 goals, and all 2000 survey items. It should be noted, however, that even though the list of 1997-98 goals has not changed, the list may no longer be a good measure of the degree of implementation since the emphasis of the project may have changed considerably over that time.

When percentage of full implementation of the 1997-98 goals is used as the standard, implementation at the end of year three in the Arts strand would be considered complete (100%); implementation in Music and Foreign Language would be considered high (81% and 83% respectively); implementation in Family Involvement (65%), Thinking Skills (58%), and Health/Emotional Health (58%) would be considered moderate, and implementation in Reading/Language Development (42%) would be considered low. It should be taken into consideration, however, that the percentages are based on few goals (and in some cases only one goal) and do not accurately represent what has been accomplished in any of the strands overall. The complete results and a more thorough discussion of third year implementation may be found in O'Phelan, Norman, & Ecton (2000).

Problems Encountered

At the end of the third year of our participation in the project, a number of difficulties and problems had become evident. These included difficulty in obtaining some of the data needed, due in part to the voluntary nature of the program and to the extra time and effort required. The school district was not interested in some of the original research questions and preferred a more narrow focus, and thus, questioned the time necessary to gather some of the data requested.

The voluntary aspect of the program also resulted in uneven levels of implementation of the program strands in different schools. What is considered full implementation of the program varies from school to school. Even taking the variations into account during evaluation, it becomes more difficult to attribute successes or failures to any particular set of procedures.

The school district treats this program as a transformational effort, changing and adapting the program as the demands of the environment require. While this is viewed as positive and necessary by the school district, aspects of the program keep changing so fast that it becomes difficult to maintain anchors upon which to base the evaluation of results. New goals and policies have been added and some original ideas abandoned as unsuitable or impossible. The constant change that is viewed by the school district as a continuous improvement effort severely affects the researchers ability to gather long-term data and to isolate what seems to be effective and what does not.

The research effort could be more effective and beneficial to the school district if the data collection instrument accurately reflected current goals and practices in the district. This could be accomplished by updating goals annually and by modifying the survey accordingly. The research team believes that those participating in program implementation would benefit from discussions and review sessions in which the program goals of current activities are clarified or

modified to fit long term purposes of the district. This could also serve to renew the commitment of those actually implementing the program.

Funding to support the research effort continues to be a problem, thus limiting the research team's time and also affecting the scope of the research effort. Communication problems further complicate research efforts as changes have been made and the research team has not always been informed until well after the changes. All of these issues and other related issues are discussed more in depth in a report on performance indicators and problems (O'Phelan, Norman, & Ecton, 1999).

Revising the Research Plan

Acknowledgement of these problems by both the school district and the research team has led to numerous discussions which focused on how to revise the evaluation plan so that it would provide the information needed for the researchers to answer what everyone agreed to be the essential questions. As a result of these discussions, the scope of the research plan will be limited to focusing on the 'enhancer' strands, fewer schools, and with emphasis on one school determined to be high in implementation of the total program. The school district will insure full cooperation of the schools evaluated and to furnish all data requested. Communication has already improved and efforts are being made to insure effective communication during all phases of this research initiative.

The school district and the research team have refocused on the central issue of how to best measure the degree to which Graduation 2010 affected student achievement. Two central research questions have been articulated to be answered: 1. To what extent are the 2010 initiatives being implemented in the Daviess County Schools?; and, 2. To what extent has student achievement increased?

Data to answer these questions will be gathered through three methods. First, to answer question one, each year a survey will be developed based on the yearly goals developed by the Graduation 2010 steering committee. For each goal, school principals and the superintendent will be asked to rate the level of implementation as a school or as a district. Second, to answer question two, achievement data will be collected from schools to longitudinally measure the progress of schools and individual students. Achievement data will include school and individual state assessment (CATS) scores, CTBS/5 (TerraNova) scores, Talents Unlimited test scores, Primary Test of Cognitive Skills (P/TCS) scores, and Woodcock-Johnson scores. Third, to develop a richer understanding of the trials and triumphs in implementing this program, the research team will take a closer look at one school with a diverse student population and recognized as high in program implementation. Using a qualitative case study approach, the researchers will devote up to eight days per year observing and interviewing the school's faculty, staff, administration, students, and parents. Data analyses will include quantitative and qualitative descriptions of survey and interview responses, quantitative comparisons of test scores and frequency variables, qualitative observation reports, and trend analyses for tested groups and individuals. Results will be reported at yearly intervals. Assessment is intended to be both formative and summative. Results will be shared with stakeholders at all levels so that thoughtful modifications can be made to increase the likelihood of reaching Graduation 2010's intended outcomes (Ecton, O'Phelan, & Norman, 2000).

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